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Food Riots as Representations of Insecurity: Examining the Relationship between Contentious Politics and Human Security

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The 2007-08 global food crisis saw the eruption of a wave of contentious action across the developing world, represented most clearly by the food riot. Food riots are sudden, unexpected events, presenting a challenge to the state that moves beyond simple demands for food. The upheaval caused by a food riot can lead to lasting instability and violence as social and political structures are challenged. The aims of the article are to: 1) identify the character of contemporary food riots in relation to traditional forms, and 2) determine the extent to which food riots can be seen to represent broader human insecurity, and 3) demonstrate the utility of contentious actions in demonstrating insecurity. This article examines the causes of the 2007-08 wave of food riots in relation to earlier manifestations. The findings show that the contemporary food riots have similar origins to their historical counterparts. The article also shows that food riots are a clear sign of insecurity, demonstrating the benefit of examining contentious politics in this context.

Introduction

On the 31 March 2008, a demonstration organised by civil society organisations in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire against rising food prices degenerated into a riot: "[a]t the height of the demonstration, before riot police started firing tear gas…around 1,500 protestors [chanted] 'we are hungry' and 'life is too expensive, you are trying to kill us.'"[1] Similar scenarios were repeated in over thirty countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East in 2007-08, as global

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increases in food prices resulted in demonstrations and riots. Although the changes in food prices that precipitated the riots emerged on global markets due to a range of complex factors, the protests were not universal in the affected regions, they were concentrated instead in particular states. The emergence of food related protest was linked to national and local factors rather than to the operation of international institutions.[2]

Food riots have a long and varied history, being especially prominent in eighteenth century Britain. The most common target of these contentious episodes tended to be persons or groups responsible for managing or distributing food. These protests were generally limited in their scope and aims, but could escalate in times of political crisis.[3] The recent manifestations have been wider, with protests against food price rises being used as cover to challenge the governance of the state.

Instead of simply being protests over access to food, these actions should be seen as representations of broader insecurity.[4] Food security emerged as part of the attempt to develop a comprehensive conception of security, under the rubric of human security, although it has lost some influence as the concept of human security has narrowed. The shift of focus of security from the state to the individual represented by human security has raised significant issues regarding access to resources, and the implications for security more generally. Recent waves of food riots in the developing world illustrate the importance of these apparently 'soft' forms of security, such as food security. Where the state is unable to ensure the human security of its population, its legitimacy may be called into question. The scene described above demonstrates the importance of economic insecurity in driving the protest, while the reaction of the state, with force being used in place of negotiations, may indicate an absence of political security.

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Examining food riots provides an opportunity to assess community perceptions of insecurity in the broad sense embodied by human security. Food riots are a form of contentious politics, which Tarrow defines as "what happens when collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around claims or the claims of those they claim to represent."[5] The focus on the claims of groups within society – expressed through demonstrations, riots, strikes, petitions, civil disobedience, and even revolution – provides a mechanism to identify challenges to human security expressed from below. The focus on contentious politics provides an opportunity to consider challenges to individuals and communities that lie at the core of human security. Although contentious actions involve groups/crowds, they are able to express issues of concern to their participants that may not be considered otherwise. The study of forms of contentious politics therefore provides an opportunity to identify human insecurity, and its potential sources. A focus on food riots allows a real-world consideration of the relationship between contentious politics and human security.

This article considers the recent wave of food riots that took place in 2007-08 in the context of human security. The aims of the article are to: 1) identify the character of contemporary food riots in relation to historical forms, and 2) determine the extent to which food riots can be seen to represent broader human insecurity, and 3) consider the utility of contentious actions in demonstrating insecurity. The first section provides an overview of the literature on food riots, providing a historical framework within which the recent events can be located. Following this, the article examines the scope of the riots that took place in 2007-08, considering the international factors that influenced conditions at the domestic level. The third section

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of the article outlines the relationship between contentious politics and human security with regard to the nature of food riots.

Food Riots and Contentious Politics

Contentious politics are an important component in all political systems. As noted above in the definition by Tarrow, contentious politics is a broad concept, capturing a range of different actions and participants. An important aspect of contentious politics is that they are shaped by the context within which they operate, with participants making use of the tools they have to hand. These actions are also constrained or enabled by the character of the political system within which they emerge. The reliance on recognised and understood practices is captured in the notion of repertoires of contention. Repertoires in this sense are actions that are adopted and repeated in subsequent actions, leading Charles Tilly to argue that:

> *In principle, we could imagine repertoires varying from non-existent to rigid, depending on the extent to which one experience with the making of collective claims affects the next experience…[and that] all participants in contention learn continuously as they interact. That includes claimants, objects of claims, third parties, and observers.*[6]

Therefore, contentious actions are built on recognised behaviours shaped by the actions and reactions of the participants and those impacted. Variety in the nature of contentious actions derives from attempts to manipulate claims and utilise practices to enable the greatest chance of success.

Food riots were an important form of collective action in eighteenth-century Britain. While access to sufficient food lies at the heart of this form of protest, it provides an opportunity to press other related claims.[7] Examining food riots in southwest Britain during the eighteenth century, Charlesworth argued that they

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"constituted a tactical strategy, a 'negotiative process', between crowd and authority".[8] A central aspect of the food riot is that it was not simply an act of random disruption/violence, but rather a means of advancing a specific claim against those in positions of authority. This echoes Thompson, who claimed that the traditional English food riot "was a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives."[9] This does not mean that demonstrations of discontent could not degenerate into widespread and uncontrolled rioting and destruction.[10] Yet, at the heart of the wave of food-related protests in eighteenth-century Britain was a feeling that traditional rights and customs were being violated,[11] repeated in the recent "response to state reforms that eliminated interventionary protections for consumers and promoted free markets"[12] that sparked a wave of austerity related riots in the developing world during the 1970s and 80s.

The practice of food riots in this period was part of an accepted repertoire of contention.[13] Charlesworth identifies the main forms of protest undertaken as:

> *the stoppage and sometimes seizure of foodstuffs in transit, forced price regulation, in the market place and, particularly in towns, the destruction of food as an act of retributive justice against merchants, dealers and retailers.*[14]

As Thompson notes, the destruction of food shows that the aim of the protest was about more than simply gaining access to food, but rather to identify injustice in the mechanisms of production and distribution.[15] Although the label riot implies a sense of randomness and unfocused opportunism, the actual protests had clearly identified targets and aims. The focus on merchants, dealers and retailers is significant in this regard, as these agents were responsible for the price and availability of food.

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Targeting these actors sent a message that levying what the community considered unfair prices during times of dearth would not be tolerated.

An understanding of the underlying motivations of the participants in these food riots highlights the importance of communities and networks in facilitating or restricting such actions. Taylor argues that central to the food riot were "generally tenuous connections between the rioters and any formal political organizations and institutions."[16] Bohstedt also notes that food price rises are more likely to spark action than other sources of perceived injustice due to the "law of necessity", which holds that "in emergencies, when survival hangs in the balance, human subsistence must take preference over property rights."[17] The limited nature of connections with formal political structures meant that the participants were less bound by the associated conventions of behaviour. The decision to resort to contentious actions can therefore be traced to two related factors. Riots were/are undertaken by crowds, not individuals, suggesting the presence of community bonds strong enough to support a sense of common injustice.[18] Limited opportunities to directly influence the formal political sphere also meant that individuals and communities were pushed more towards direct action, in the absence of other options for participation. This suggests that, although price increases of food or other staples may be the initiator of protest, the nature of the claim can change where participants see an opportunity to make broader claims against the state.

Although the spark that initiated the food riot came from within the community, based on a sense of injustice, external factors also played an important role in shaping the development of protest. Examining food riots during three distinct periods in eighteenth-century Britain, Charlesworth notes that the emergence of a national political crisis facilitated broader mobilisation of protest actions across the

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southwest.[19] The presence of a crisis allowed contentious actions to spread beyond the narrow geographical confines within which they were initiated. The distraction of a political crisis provided an opportunity for diffusion, as the authorities were preoccupied and less able to assert control and prevent contagion as easily. During times of stability, the presence of a strong and effective governing structure ensured that protest was limited to areas in which it emerged. These differences are captured in the political opportunity structure, where changes in regime openness, elite coherence, political alignments, availability of allies, and levels of repression determine the range of possible forms of action.[20] In the face of a closed political system and few allies at the elite level, claims were more likely to be expressed in contentious forms, such as through food riots.

The use of violence, often against property, in the food riots needs to be contextualised to be fully understood. Tilly's classification of different forms of collective violence is useful in understanding the nature of food riots.[21] Traditional food riots in eighteenth-century Europe can most often be classified as forms of violent rituals. They involved the adoption of recognised and accepted behaviours that were imbued with meanings that both the participants and the targets of their claims understood. Although these actions sometimes involved violence in the destruction of food and property, the incidence of violence against the person was more limited.[22] The contentious nature of the food riot also meant that these rituals could be transgressed, leading to more opportunistic forms of violence and protest.[23]As noted above, a key factor was the ability of the state to maintain order and where this was restricted due to external crises "individuals or clusters of individuals [may] use immediately damaging ends that would be unavailable or forbidden to them under other circumstances."[24] This highlights the point that although food riots were

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generally organised and were part of an accepted repertoire of action, they had the potential to evolve and change in response to shifts in the opportunity structure faced by participants. Attempts to move outside the accepted script or situations with limited control could lead to an increased chance of violence or degeneration into full-scale conflict between participants and the authorities.

The decline of the food riot as a form of contentious action in Britain reinforces the notion that these events were part of a more complex contextual repertoire. Examining the decline of the food riot, Taylor argues that:

> *the shift [away from food riots] was from a reactive to a proactive form of collective action, and the repertoire of possible forms of collective action in which a population might engage changed, to exclude food riots (because they were no longer effective) and to include strikes and other forms of proactive action (because they had become more effective).*[25]

The shift from reactive to proactive forms of action involved a greater degree of organisation and planning than was seen in the periodic food riots, as well as a broadening of demands. This shift did not result in the immediate decline of food riot as a tool of protest, as Charlesworth notes that the emergence of organised "radical-democrats" used the existence of a food crisis to "mobilise their fellows throughout the region."[26] The decline of the food riot as a form of contentious politics in nineteenth-century Britain[27] demonstrates the increasing importance of organisational structures within society. Food riots represented some degree of organisation and common sense of injustice within the community, but they lacked the structure offered by formal organisations. The move to create unions and political parties that represented the interests of the general population overcame (to some extent) the previous exclusion from formal politics.

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Turning to a more recent wave of food-related contention, a continuation of the historical form can be seen. Walton and Seddon identified 146 protests in 39 countries over the 1976-92 period that were linked to the imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment policies.[28] Central to the protests was the move away from the paternalist developmental state to a focus on neo-liberal stabilisation. The scale of the changes imposed on states by the austerity packages led to a change in the social contract, which Thompson has argued "was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor."[29] In such an environment "[r]iots and street demonstrations are the natural means of redress for popular assemblies mobilized by a sense of immediacy, betrayal, and the need for autonomous action."[30] Although the protests shared motivations with those seen in earlier periods (removal of state protections), they possessed an extra layer of complexity, with the increasingly connected global system limiting the ability of states to provide remedies for their populations.[31] This change in the role of the state fostered the spread of contentious actions across the developing world as protestors focused on the effects the austerity measures imposed by the IMF and World Bank were having on their standard of living.

It is important not to overemphasize the impact of globalisation on the spread of the protests at this time. While the level of communication internationally had increased significantly by this period, allowing for the spread of news about protests in multiple locations, the rate at which the protests spread was relatively slow.[32] Addressing the issue of information, Thompson argued that "if rumours often grew beyond all bounds, they were always rooted in at least some shallow soil of fact."[33]

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This would appear to indicate that the spread of protest events was facilitated by the diffusion of information, yet they remained dependent on the domestic or local perception of injustice to facilitate action. Despite the apparently globalised nature of the protests and the awareness of similar actions elsewhere, no lasting transnational networks or solidarities emerged. As Tarrow argues "the most striking aspect of the protests was their domestic resonance and their articulation with internal political alignments".[34] These aspects point to the fact that although increased communication facilitates the spread of information, food riots remain tied to the domestic context. The article now considers the global food crisis of 2007-08 and the wave of food riots that emerged as a result.

Food Riots and the Global Food Crisis 2007-08

The global food crisis of 2007-08 initiated another wave of food related protests and riots across the developing world. The primary form of contentious action undertaken in protest over food was a demonstration or gathering. In Fatullah, Bangladesh in April 2008, 20,000 garments workers "wrecked cars and buses, vandalized factories and hurled bricks and stones at police."[35] Similar scenes occurred in Jakarta in June 2008 where "[r]iot police fired water cannons to break up the violent demonstration by about 1,000 stone-throwing protestors who threw Molotov cocktails, smashed police cars and tried to break down the gates of parliament"[36] These events did not start out as full-scale riots but, as with the protest in Abidjan mentioned above, often began with organised gatherings that deteriorated into violent confrontations, as the authorities attempted to manage or disperse the demonstrators. In some cases this resulted in death and injury, as in Mogadishu in May 2008 when troops opened fire on rioters, killing two people.[37] These protests can be related to the

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historical food riots of eighteenth century Britain, as well as the more recent austerity protests of the 1970s and 80s. The aspect in which they differed from these earlier protests was in the speed at which they emerged and spread.

The prices of a range of foodstuffs and non-food commodities increased significantly in 2007-08, following an extended period of stable prices. Conceição and Mendoza note that in March 2008 "the price of traded wheat had gone up by over 130% compared to year before levels, while the price of traded rice was up by over 70%."[38] This led to price levels that had not been seen (in real terms) since the early 1980s.[39] The speed of the price rises has been linked to the convergence of a number of underlying factors, including: financial speculation, hoarding, weather shocks, productivity slowdown, rising oil prices, and biofuel demand.[40] Although food prices subsequently fell, it has been noted that the underlying causes have not been dealt with, leading to increased likelihood of shocks in the medium- to long-term.[41] Lang has made the point more forcefully arguing that the "crisis in 2007-8 was not a blip, but creeping normality."[42] The notion of a permanent crisis points to the possibility of further food riots in the future, reinforcing the need to understand their meanings and implications.

While the pressure on international food prices led to significant hardship at the domestic level, it is important to contextualise the understanding of these events. The first point of note is that a relatively small volume of global production is actually traded, estimated to be around 5-7% of total production in the case of rice.[43] This leads to the point that changes in international and domestic food prices are only marginally related. On analysing food price rises in 76 developing states over 2005-07, De Hoyos and Medvedev found that only three had price rises above the international level and that the average domestic price rise was 18% of price rises

seen at the international level.[44] This highlights the need to consider the domestic political context in fomenting food related contentious actions.

The state has traditionally been the guarantor of food rights, with a key role in ensuring that sufficient food is available to those that need it. Hossain argues that the 2007-08 crisis was significant in this respect given "the inability of many smaller countries to act to protect national food staple supplies, presumably because of growing reliance on international food markets as opposed to protection of national agricultural production."[45] In such an environment the ability of the state to act to resolve crises is called into question. It has also been argued by Conceição and Mendoza that "[p]roblems related to lack of access to food…are critically tied to ownership and exchange, which are exacerbated in contexts of high levels of poverty and inequality as well as economic crises and volatility."[46] This reinforces the point that poorer states are less able to guarantee food supplies, making their populations more vulnerable to further instability and volatility. Together, these arguments demonstrate the central role of the state in managing the challenges presented by increased food prices, with claims being made by the population targeting its institutions.

The number of protests that emerged in 2007-08 together with their temporal and geographical spread reinforced the global nature of the crisis. Patel and McMichael have argued that "[t]he most obvious cause of these protests was the sudden and steep global rise in commodity prices, increases that were passed on directly to consumers, particularly those in urban areas."[47] Although the price rises were not completely transmitted to domestic markets, the wide range of goods that saw price rises meant the impact at the domestic level was still significant. This view is also supported by Hossain, who noted that "[t]he dominant understanding of food

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riots has been that of knee-jerk, almost physiological responses to need"[48] rather than purposeful protests aimed at making claims on the state. As these authors go on to note, the food riots were about more than just access to food, but rather represented a wider dissatisfaction with the operation of existing political structures. Food price rises presented a trigger for frustration to lead to action, in the absence of effective mechanisms for meaningful participation.

An examination of the contemporary food riots in relation to those of eighteenth century Britain or the austerity riots of the 1970s and 80s reveals clear continuities. The focus of the previous riots was on perceived injustice, rather than the absolute price of food or the presence of chronic hunger.[49] Central to the sense of injustice in the contemporary wave of protest was the notion that "the extreme nature of the rise in food price in the absence of much evidence of food shortages, left a sense of something unnatural about the way food markets were working".[50] The apparent disconnect between food supply and price variations fed feelings of injustice, leading in turn to attempts to express these concerns. Invoking the moral economy and the law of necessity expanded the political opportunity structure, allowing for the adoption of previously unacceptable behaviours.[51] In this light, food related protests can be viewed as an attempt to correct policy failures and reinstate or reinvent an idealised status quo, rather than solely to secure access to food.[52] The states affected possess mechanisms and institutions for participation and representation that were absent in the context of historic food riots, potentially pointing to their failure to fulfil their appointed functions.

Having identified the underlying motivations for the food-related protests, it is important to explore the reasons for their degeneration into violent forms of contentious action. Reflecting on the contemporary riots, Bush argues that "[a]lthough

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the demonstrations and riots were sometimes precipitated by food price rises, the protests usually included demands to reduce political repression, promote political reform and curtail the influence of international firms."[53] Examining the 2007-08 riots in Africa, Berezneva and Lee find that "higher levels of human poverty and fewer political freedoms are associated with the incidence of food riots".[54] These findings illustrate two important contributing factors: poverty and lack of political freedoms. Poverty clearly motivates action, as the price rises impacted hardest on the urban poor, who lack access to other forms of subsistence that may be available to rural populations and live within more dense community networks. As Thompson has argued, "the food riot did not require a high degree of organization. It required a consensus of support in the community, and an inherited pattern of actions with its own objectives and restraints."[55] Concentrated populations of urban poor provide a fertile ground upon which such communities can be mobilized in the face of perceived injustice.

Lack of political freedoms and rights is also an important motivator behind the emergence of food riots. Under authoritarian frameworks of limited pluralism and weak mobilization, opportunities to express discontent are limited and restricted.[56] Where repression is used by the regime to control dissent it has been found that the result is likely to be an increase in violent forms of protest.[57] A more recent study by Carey has found that "protest and repression are…interdependent" and that "the level of hostile state actions was lowest in democracies and highest in semi-democracies."[58] Lack of negative feedback mechanisms means that authoritarian states are less able to detect and defuse discontent through the introduction of incremental change, potentially leading to the development of crises as tensions build.[59] Examining the association between poverty, food insecurity and violent conflict, Pinstrup-Andersen

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and Shimokawa find a positive relationship, leading them to argue "[p]eople with nothing to lose may also be willing to be recruited to execute violent acts if they are convinced that it would contribute to justice for the population group of interest".[60] The lack of political freedoms and effective mechanisms for participation, combined with conditions of poverty, created conditions in which resort to violent contention was the most effective means of challenging the status quo. As mentioned above, food riots sometimes started as peaceful demonstrations, only deteriorating into violent confrontations after attempted repression by the state.

The extensive nature of the riots and the common origins in world food price rises raises important questions regarding their impact on human security. Aside from the challenge presented to food security, the use of violence by the protestors and the authorities threatens other forms of human security, including personal and community, while the lasting effects of the riots can also undermine attempts to develop economic security. Perhaps the most central issue relates to political security. The absence of political rights and freedoms necessary to express discontent through participatory methods can arguably be seen to lie behind the resort to collective violence. The article now turns to consider the implications of food riots for human security, and whether it can provide a tool for interpreting the actions that were observed.

Human Security and the Implications of Food Riots

Food riots represent more than simply random or spontaneous outbursts of unexplained discontent and, as such, they present a challenge for the practices embodied by human security. As noted above, there are multiple contributing factors that lead to the emergence of food riots, moving beyond lack of access to food to

political and economic insecurity. It is also important to note that the effects of food riots outlast the protest itself. As Thompson argues "riot was a calamity, often resulting in profound dislocation of social relations within a community, whose results could linger on for years."[61] From this perspective, the phenomenon of the food riot represents a source of ongoing insecurity, especially in states lacking the capacity and will to manage dissent.

Human security has emerged as an attempt to capture threats to the security of the individual, rather than those of the state.[62] The concept of human security provides tools with which to understand the emergence and meaning of food riots, as well as their impact. By broadening the focus of security to include food, health, economic, and environmental drivers, it is possible to place challenges to these forms of security in the wider context. This does not preclude consideration of more standard forms of security threat to the individual – personal, community, and political – but rather acknowledges the interconnected nature of the societal context within which these threats develop. As Christie argues, the significance of human security is that it "provides a framework for disparate communities to talk about issues of security in ways that were not possible when security was understood to relate directly to the state."[63] Human security opens the way to consider the underlying causes of conflict and potentially find a more sustainable long-term solution that will prevent security threats from re-emerging as frequently.

Although the concept of human security has merit in this context, it has received criticism on several counts. The first claim against human security is that it lacks specificity, with Ewan arguing that "a concept that combines elements as diverse as violent conflict, poverty and social well-being lacks the degree of analytical specificity necessary for the analysis of dependent and independent variables."[64] This

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does not invalidate the concept of human security, but could result in difficulties in imposing overarching theoretical frameworks to explain different situations. The second major challenge is that human security involves securitising issues that are more effectively dealt with through normal politics. In this vein, Thomas and Tow argue "[w]ithin a given state, events or problems such as those relating to food distribution, gender discrimination, and basic shelter are usually contained and resolved within the state's sovereign boundaries and are thus best viewed as development problems."[65] Individually these particular issues are effectively dealt with under the guise of development, but it is also important to consider the security implications of failing to deal with them effectively, as illustrated by instability leading to and resulting from food riots.

In addition to these specific claims against human security, it is argued that although human security has been important in shifting the focus from the state to the individual, it does not challenge underlying power structures.[66] States remain the dominant actor in the political system. However, shifting the focus to the security of the individual, by the very nature of the act, elevates the interests of the individual. In a related vein, Mauzy argues that "[h]uman rights and the fostering of democracy are always controversial because they touch the core of how power is distributed in a society, of state-society relations, and of the obligations and limits of political authority."[67] Considering the security of the individual potentially presents a similar challenge to existing structures and practices. While human security may not provide the solution, it does provide an opportunity to discuss and consider the challenges facing the individual from multiple sources.

Human security has much to contribute to the understanding of food riots, as noted above. Although the food riot may develop into a range of demands, at its core

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is an expression of concern over secure and equitable access to food. The UNDP definition of food security states:

> *All people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food. This requires not just enough food to go around. It requires that people have ready access to food – they have an 'entitlement' to food, by growing it for themselves, by buying it or by taking advantage of a public food distribution system.*[68]

This definition outlines the complex nature of food security, identifying economic issues as well as those related simply to access.[69] The cost of food has always been an important part of the household budget, as Tarrow notes "in older periods of history, some 80 to 90 percent of a poor family's income went for food, and most of that was for bread, which was deeply vulnerable to changes in harvests, times of war, and price inflation".[70] Although food costs are significant in many developing states, it is sudden changes in prices that are more likely to precipitate riots and demonstrations. Food price rises put pressure on household budgets presenting a challenge to their economic security, where food represents a significant expenditure. Paarlberg notes that the food riots of 2007-08 occurred among the urban poor, who are generally better fed than their rural counterparts, pointing to the importance of a sense of community in fostering action, rather than absolute need.[71] Considering food riots of the 1970s and 80s it has been noted that the greatest impact on overall hunger was driven by the recession that followed the fall in the price of food rather than the price rises themselves, as economic insecurity increased.[72]

Food riots also represent broader forms of insecurity, particularly political security. The importance of political security derives from the fact that:

> *Agents of the state are responsible for their actions and accountable for their acts of commission and omission towards social and economic*

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> *policies which can help in reducing poverty, mitigating fear of conflict, violation of human rights…and initiating and sustaining development processes.*[73]

This provides the state with a central role in guaranteeing human security. Where the state lacks the capacity or willingness to address these issues, the stability of the state may be threatened. At the same time, the ability of the state to operate independently has been increasingly undermined by the development of globalisation and the interconnectedness within the international system that has resulted.[74] The failure of the state to ensure human security can lead to tension and conflict, as the subject population feels that its needs are not being met. In this context, sudden changes in the price of food coupled with economic decline present an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with the status quo, manifested in the food riot.

The food riot is an important marker of insecurity and discontent. Although the precipitating causes vary significantly from case to case, the impacts of food riots are significant for human security. In addition to seeking redress against the state, the eruption of a riot or demonstration centred on food may also provide cover for the settling of scores with rival groups or individuals. As noted above, food riots rely on a sense of injustice within the community sufficient enough to generate action.[75] Where existing tensions or hostilities are present, these may also be pursued under the guise of discontent over price rises. This can result in the undermining of personal and community security long after the event that precipitated the initial demonstration has passed. In considering the nature of the food riot, it is necessary to examine a complex range of contributing social, political and economic factors, reinforcing the utility of human security in aiding an understanding of the causes and implications of these events.

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The issue of underlying interests that drive food riots has led to claims that there is an urban bias in their representation and management. Examining this issue Swinnen argues that "[w]hen hit by a negative relative income shock, such as an increase in food prices, urban consumers will react politically, e.g. through demonstrations."[76] While the likelihood of food riots in the urban context is greater than in remote rural settings this does not undermine the fact that high food prices can lead to insecurity. The diverse and unpredictable nature of food riots is supported by Taylor regarding historic protests, who found that rather than mobilising already active sections of the population "the protests' initial inspiration… [came] from outside of the traditional political arena and mobilized apolitical parts of the community."[77] This in turn reflects the significance of poverty and the absence or weakness of effective civil society that is associated with a lack of political freedom, as noted above. In the absence of effective vertical networks linking communities to elites, they are forced to fall back on horizontal networks and personal connections to express discontent, leading to demonstrations.[78] In the context of human security this can undermine the ability of the state to maintain order, as communities organise to directly challenge its authority through contentious actions.

Figure 1: Relationship between Human Security and Contentious Politics in the Context of Food Riots

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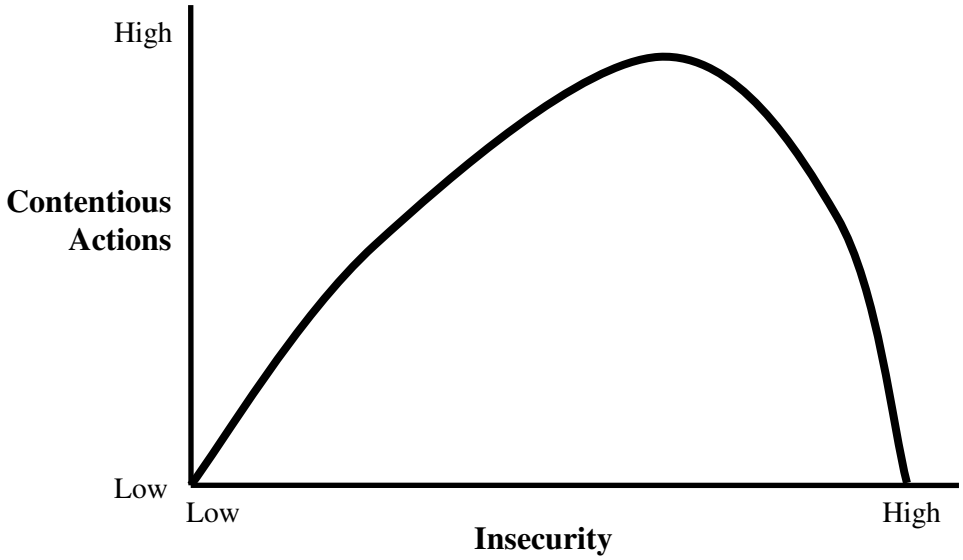

The food riot represents a complex blend of different forms of insecurity, combined with a desire to seek redress for perceived injustices. The expected relationship between insecurity and contentious actions that combine to lead to the food riot is represented in Figure 1. This shows that increases in the level of insecurity lead to corresponding increases in the level of contentious actions in the form of demonstrations, protests, marches, riots. However, the figure also indicates that once the level of insecurity reaches a certain level contentious actions fall dramatically. Considering the nature of the food riot, this is explained by the level of overall insecurity. Contentious actions around food emerge where there is a sense of injustice, thereby also providing an opportunity to critique the regime. Repression from the state can lead to increases in the level of contentious action to a certain point, beyond which the benefits of taking to the streets are outweighed by the costs of repression. Therefore, when considering the relationship between food riots and insecurity, it is important to take into account the overall level of insecurity; political insecurity (state repression) will increase as the scale of protest increases.

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Food riots clearly represent a reaction by the subject population to insecurity with the law of necessity providing the spark to ignite protest. Threats to different forms of individual and community security lie behind many of the manifestations of contentious actions that were placed under the broader category of food riots. Rather than simply treating these as generalised unrest and anarchy, human security provides a tool to engage with and understand the underlying causes. Analysing food riots in this manner also strengthens the utility of human security in the face of claims that it is too broad to be applied in a practical manner, by identifying actual manifestations of insecurity that signal concerns that are not being addressed. Human security enables consideration of the complex interaction of factors that can lead to these actions taking place, to find a means with which to resolve crises and potentially to prevent their future re-emergence.

Conclusion

Food riots play an important role in displaying dissatisfaction and frustration with the current situation and a desire to reinstate or reinvent an idealised status quo. The enactment of such events has generally moved beyond issues around access to food, encompassing issues of equity, political and other rights. Therefore, examining these events allows for a deeper understanding of tensions within society. While the impact of the 2007-08 food crisis was felt on a global scale, the reactions at the domestic level were shaped by the local context. Pre-existing social, political, and economic conditions combined with the reaction of the state to the crisis to determine the course of events; in this case, whether there was a food riot. This shows that the contemporary food riots emerged in similar ways to historical manifestations, local

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expressions of discontent that grew or shrunk in response to the reactions of the authorities.

Considering food riots through the framework of human security clearly marks them out as a manifestation of insecurity. The demands of the participants move beyond simply access to food to encompass the character of the political and economic system, challenging the nature of the system that produces and distributes food. This can in turn lead to increased insecurity where those in power are unwilling to tolerate dissent and resort to repressive measures. The aftermath of the contemporary food riot can also have significant downstream effects on security. Riots leave a physical legacy, in the destruction of property and damage to economic infrastructure. They also have a less tangible impact over the longer term on communities and the state, undermining trust and leaving feelings of uncertainty regarding future actions. These effects reinforce the need to consider disruptive contentious events within the broad scope of human security.

The shift from the state to the individual as the primary locus for security necessitates the identification of ways to assess the security of the individual. Expressions of discontent (or insecurity) represented in contentious politics – riots, demonstrations, strikes, revolutions – provide a means of understanding some forms of human insecurity. This article has focused on food riots as a specific manifestation of contentious politics. It may be possible, through an examination of effect of contentious politics in different contexts, to identify broader cases and causes of human insecurity. Within a coupling of human security and contentious politics, the former is able to capture the complex nature of motivations and pressures that drive the latter, in conditions of insecurity. A focus on contentious politics also allows a

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move from the level of the state to that of the individual (or at least the community), which is the ultimate goal of human security.

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[1] All Africa, Food Price Hikes Spark Riots. 31 March 2008. These chants echo eighteenth-century crowds chanting "We'd rather be hanged than starved!" Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*, 10.

[2] Hossain and Green, *Living on a Spike*.

[3] Charlesworth, Spatial Diffusion of Riots.

[4] Bush, Food Riots.

[5] Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 4.

[6] Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, 15-16.

[7] Waller and Millard (1992) note a similar phenomenon in the communist states of Eastern Europe, where environmental issues were used by opponents to press broader claims against the state.

[8] Charlesworth, Spatial Diffusion of Riots, 6.

[9] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd, 78.

[10] Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*.

[11] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd.

[12] Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*, 34.

[13] Tilly, *Contentious Performances*.

[14] Charlesworth, Spatial Diffusion of Riots, 1-2.

[15] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd.

[16] Taylor, Food Riots Revisited, 486.

[17] Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*, 9.

[18] Taylor, Food Riots Revisited.

[19] Charlesworth, Spatial Diffusion of Riots.

[20] Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, 92.

[21] Tilly, *Politics of Collective Violence*.

[22] Thompson, *Moral Economy of the English Crowd*.

[23] Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*.

[24] Tilly, *Politics of Collective Violence*, 131.

[25] Taylor, Food Riots Revisited, 483.

[26] Charlesworth, Spatial Diffusion of Riots, 12.

[27] Tilly, Food Entitlement.

[28] Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*, 42.

[29] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd, 79.

[30] Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*, 53.

[31] Walton and Ragin, Sources of Political Protest.

[32] The number of protest events was less than five 1976-82, reaching a high of less than 20 in 1983-85, before declining. Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*, 43.

[33] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd, 115.

[34] Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 68.

[35] AFX Asia, Bangladeshi Workers Riot Over Soaring Food Prices. 13 April 2008.

[36] Agence France Presse, Indonesian MPs to Review of Fuel Price Hike After Violent Demo. 25 June 2008.

[37] Associated Press, 2 Killed as Troops Fire Into Somali Riot Over Food Prices, 5 May 2008.

[38] Conceição and Mendoza, Anatomy of the Global Food Crisis, 1159.

[39] Headey and Fan, Anatomy of a Crisis; Paarlberg, *Food Politics*.

[40] Headey and Fan, Anatomy of a Crisis, 2008. The prominence of biofuels in debates around the nature of the global food crisis has led to a sharp fall in demand from developed states. See Dauvergne and Neville, Political Economy of Biofuels.

[41] Conceição and Mendoza, Anatomy of the Global Food Crisis.

[42] Lang, Crisis? What Crisis?, 95.

[43] Conceição and Mendoza note that "rice is a highly 'political crop' notably in Asia – any instability in its supply could cause widespread political unrest". Conceição and Mendoza, Anatomy of the Global Food Crisis, 1169. The widespread consumption of and reliance on rice also means that the speed of

price changes is more important than the actual level of change. This is exacerbated by the fact that rice is not traded on the commodities futures markets, leading to increased risk of sudden changes. Thanks to the reviewer for pointing this out.

[44] De Hoyos and Medvedev, *Effects of Higher Food* Prices, 6.

[45] Hossain, Reading Political Responses, 330.

[46] Conceição and Mendoza, Anatomy of the Global Food Crisis, 1161-62.

[47] Patel and McMichael, Political Economy of the Food Riot, 9.

[48] Hossain, Reading Political Responses, 330.

[49] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd; Walton and Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots*.

[50] Hossain, Reading Political Responses, 331.

[51] On political opportunity structures see: Tilly, *Contentious Performances*.

[52] This point reinforces similarities with historic riots as Bohstedt where elites dealing with them "had to balance force with remedy in order to rejuvenate paternalist mythology". Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*, 2-3. Thanks to the reviewer for pointing out and helping to clarify this connection.

[53] Bush, Food Riots, 122.

[54] Berezneva and Lee, Examining the African Food Riots, 18.

[55] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd, 119.

[56] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, 39.

[57] Moore, Repression and Dissent.

[58] Carey, Relationship between Protest and Repression, 8-9.

[59] Dryzek, *Rational Ecology*.

[60] Pinstrup-Andersen and Shimokawa, Poverty and Armed Conflict, 513.

[61] Thompson, Moral Economy of the English Crowd, 120.

[62] Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, *Human Security*.

[63] Christie, Critical Voices and Human Security, 170.

[64] Ewan, Deepening the Human Security Debate, 184.

[65] Thomas and Tow, Utility of Human Security, 179.

[66] Paarlberg, *Food Politics*.

[67] Mauzy, Human Rights and 'Asian Values', 210.

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[68] Cited in Scanlan and Jenkins, Military Power and Food Security, 161.

[69] McDonald reinforces this point arguing that "The notion of food security also encompasses examinations of a variety of ecological, social, economic, and political factors to identify the choices and challenges that determine whether people have the food they need." McDonald, *Food Security*, 2.

[70] Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 42.

[71] Paarlberg, *Food Politics*, 27.

[72] Paarlberg, *Food Politics*, 30.

[73] Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, *Human Security*, 168.

[74] Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, *Human Security*, 12-13.

[75] Taylor, Food Riots Revisited.

[76] Swinnen, Food Prices and Poverty, 35.

[77] Cited in Taylor, Food Riots Revisited, 487.

[78] Taylor, Food Riots Revisited.

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